


THE TIMELESS MESSAGE

By Ven Piyadassi Thera

ome prefer to call the teaching of the Buddha a religion, others call it a philosophy, still others think of it as both religion and philosophy. It may, however, be more correct to call it a **‘Way of Life’**. But that does not mean that Buddhism is nothing more than an ethical code. Far from it, it is a way of moral, spiritual and intellectual training leading to complete freedom of mind. The Buddha himself called his teaching *‘Dhamma-vinaya’*, the Doctrine and the Discipline. But Buddhism, in the strictest sense of the word, cannot be called a religion, for if by religion is meant ‘action or conduct indicating belief in, reverence for, and desire to please, a divine ruling power; the exercise or practice of rites or observances implying this ...; recognition on the part of man of some higher unseen power as having control of his destiny, and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship,’ Buddhism

certainly is not such a religion.

In Buddhist thought, there is no awareness or conviction of the existence of a Creator of any form who rewards and punishes the good and ill deeds of the creatures of his creation. A Buddhist takes refuge in the Buddha (*Buddham saranam gacchami*) but not in the hope that he will be saved by the Master. The Buddha is only a teacher who points out the way and guides the followers to their individual deliverance.

A sign-board at the parting of roads, for instance, indicates directions, and it is left to the wayfarer to tread along the way watching his steps. The board certainly will not take him to his desired destination.

A doctor diagnoses the ailment and prescribes; it is left to the patient to test the prescription. The attitude of the Buddha towards his followers is like that of an understanding and compassionate teacher or a physician.

The highest worship is that paid to the best of men, those great and daring spirits who have, with their wide and penetrating grasp of reality, wiped out ignorance, and rooted out defilements. The men who saw Truth are true helpers, but Buddhists do not pray to them. They only pay reverence to the revealers of Truth for having pointed out the path to true happiness and deliverance. Happiness is what one must achieve of oneself; nobody else can make one better or worse. 'Purity and impurity depend on oneself. One can neither purify nor defile another.'

In search of Truth

While lying on his death-bed between the two Sala trees at Kusinara the eighty-year-old Buddha seeing the flowers offered to him, addressed the Venerable Ananda thus: 'They who, Ananda, are correct in life, living according to the *Dhamma* – it is they who rightly honour, revere and venerate the *Tathagata* (the Perfect One) with the worthiest homage. Therefore, Ananda, be ye correct in life, living according to the *Dhamma*. Thus, should you train yourselves.' This encouragement of the Buddha on living according to the Dhamma shows clearly that what is of highest importance is training in mental, verbal and bodily conduct, and not the mere offering of flowers to the Enlightened Ones. The emphasis is on living the right life.

As to whether Buddhism is a philosophy, that depends upon the definition of the word; and whether it is possible to give a definition that will cover all existing systems of philosophical thought is doubtful. Etymologically philosophy means **to love** (*Gr. philein*) **wisdom** (*sophia*). **'Philosophy has been both the seeking of wisdom and the wisdom sought.'** In Indian thought, philosophy is termed *darsana*, vision of truth. In brief, the aim of philosophy should be to find out the ultimate truth.

Buddhism also advocates the search for truth. But it is no mere speculative reasoning, a theoretical structure, a mere acquiring and storing of knowledge. The Buddha emphasises the practical aspect of his

teaching, the application of knowledge to life – looking into life and not merely at it.

For the Buddha, the entire teaching is just the understanding of the unsatisfactory nature of all phenomenal existence and the cultivation of the path leading away from this unsatisfactoriness. This is his ‘philosophy’.

In Buddhism wisdom is of the highest importance; for purification comes through wisdom, through understanding. But the Buddha never praised mere intellect. According to him, knowledge should go hand in hand with purity of heart, with moral excellence (*vijjā-caranasampanna*). Wisdom gained by understanding and development of the qualities of mind and heart is wisdom par excellence (*bhavanamaya panna*). It is saving knowledge, and not mere speculation, logic or specious reasoning. Thus it is clear that Buddhism is neither mere love of, nor inducing the search after wisdom, nor devotion (though they have their significance and bearing on mankind), but an encouragement of a practical application of the teaching that leads the follower to dispassion, enlightenment and final deliverance.

Though we call the teaching of the Buddha ‘**Buddhism**’, thus including it among the ‘**isms**’ and ‘**ologies**’, it does not really matter what we label it. Call it religion, philosophy, Buddhism or by any other name you like. These labels are of little significance to one who goes in search of truth and deliverance.

When Upatissa and Kolita (who were later to become Sariputta and Maha Moggallana, the two chief disciples of the Buddha) were wandering in search of the doctrine of deliverance, Upatissa saw the Venerable Assaji (one of the first five disciples of the Master) who was on his alms-round. Upatissa was greatly struck by the dignified deportment of the Elder. Thinking it not the right time to inquire and question, Upatissa followed the Elder Assaji to his resting place, and then approached and greeted him and asked about his master's teaching. The Venerable Assaji, rather reluctant to speak much, humbly said: 'I cannot expound the doctrine and discipline at length, but I can tell you the meaning briefly.' Upatissa's reply is interesting: 'Well, friend, tell little or much; what I want is just the meaning. Why speak many words?' Then the Venerable Assaji repeated a single verse which embraces the Buddha's entire doctrine of causality:

"Whatever from a cause proceeds, thereof
The Tathagata has explained the cause,
Its cessation too he has explained.
This is the teaching of the Supreme Sage."

Upatissa instantly grasped the meaning and attained the first stage of realization, comprehending 'whatever is of the nature of arising, all that is of the nature of ceasing'.

The Practical Teacher

No amount of talk and discussion not directed towards

right understanding will lead us to deliverance. What is needed is right instruction and right understanding. We may even derive right instructions from nature, from trees and flowers, from stones and rivers. There are many instances where people gained enlightenment and release from taints by merely watching a leaf fall, the flow of water, a forest fire, the blowing out of a lamp. This struck a chord in them, and realizing the impermanent nature of things, they gained deliverance. Yes, the lotus awaits the sunlight, and no sooner does the sun shine than the lotus opens and brings delight to all.

The Buddha was not concerned with some metaphysical problems which only confuse man and upset his mental equilibrium. Their solution surely will not free mankind from misery and ill. That was why the Buddha hesitated to answer such questions, and at times refrained from explaining those which were often wrongly formulated. The Buddha was a practical teacher. His sole aim was to explain in all its detail the problem of *dukkha*, (suffering), the universal fact of life, to make people feel its full force, and to convince them of it. He has definitely told us what he explains and what he does not explain.

Once the Buddha was living at Kosambi (near Allahabad) in the simsapa grove. Then gathering a few leaves in his hand, the Buddha addressed the monks:

- What do you think, monks, which is greater in quantity, the handful of simsapa leaves gathered by me, or what is in the forest overhead?

- Not many, trifling, Venerable Sir, are the leaves in the handful gathered by the Blessed One, many are the leaves in the forest overhead.
- Even so, monks, many are the things I have fully realized, but not declared unto you; few are the things I have declared unto you. And why, monks, have I not declared them? They, monks, are, indeed, not useful, are not essential to the life of purity, they do not lead to disgust, to dispassion, to cessation, to tranquility, to full understanding, to enlightenment, to Nibbana. That is why, monks, they are not declared by me.
- And what is it, monks, that I have declared? This is suffering – this have I declared. This is the arising of suffering – this have I declared. This is the path leading to the cessation of suffering – this have I declared.
- And why, monks, have I declared these truths? They are, indeed useful, are essential to the life of purity, they lead to disgust, to dispassion, to cessation, to tranquility, to full understanding, to enlightenment, to Nibbana. That is why, monks, they are declared by me.' Thus spoke the Buddha.

Some scholars, however, do not appreciate this attitude of the Master, they even doubt his enlighten-

ment and label him an agnostic. Scholars will ever argue and speculate. These are not questions of today or yesterday, they were raised in the time of the Buddha. Even Sakuludayi the Wanderer, for instance, asked about the past and the future and the Buddha's reply was categorical:

‘Let be the past, let be the future, I will teach you the Dhamma:

“ When this is, that comes to be,
With the arising of this, that arises,
When this is not, that does not come to be,
With the cessation of this, that ceases. ”

This in a nutshell is the Buddhist doctrine of conditionality or Dependent Arising (*paticca samuppada*). And this forms the foundation of the Four Noble Truths, the central conception of Buddhism.

The Peerless Doctor

The Buddha is known as the peerless physician (*bhisakko*), the supreme surgeon (*sallakatto anuttaro*). He indeed is an unrivalled healer. The Buddha's method of exposition of the Four Noble Truths is comparable to that of a physician. As a physician, he first diagnosed the illness, next he discovered the cause or the arising of the illness, then considered its removal and lastly applied the remedy.

Suffering (*dukkha*) is the illness; craving (*tanha*) is the arising or the root cause of the illness (*samudaya*);

through the removal of craving the illness is removed and that is the cure (*nirodha* = *nibbana*). The Eightfold Path (*magga*) is the remedy.

A sick man should become aware of his ailment, he should take notice of it lest it becomes acute, he should then think of a way of removing its cause; with this end in view he goes to a physician who diagnoses and prescribes a remedy. Through the efficacy of the remedy the patient gets rid of the ailment and that is the cure. Thus suffering is not to be ignored, but to be known (*abhinneyya*); for it is the dire disease. Craving, the cause, is to be removed, to be abandoned (*pahatabba*); the Eightfold Path is to be practised, to be cultivated (*bhavetabba*); for it is the remedy. With the knowledge of suffering, with the removal of craving through the practice of the path, Nibbana's realization (*saccikatabba*) is ensured. It is the cure, the complete detachment, the release from craving.

The Buddha's reply to Sela, the brahmin, who doubted the Master's enlightenment is interesting:

"I know what should be known, what should Be
cultivated I have cultivated,
What should be abandoned that have I let go, Hence,
O brahmin, I am Buddha – the Awakened One."

As these truths are interconnected and interdependent, seeing one or more of the four truths implies seeing the others as well. To one who denies suffering, a path, treading along which one gains deliverance from

suffering, is meaningless. In brief, denying one single truth amounts to denying the other three as well, and that is to deny the entire teaching of the Buddha.

To the staunch materialist who says: 'I do not want to swallow all this nonsense,' this teaching may appear rather dull, puzzling and out of place, but to those who strive to cultivate a realistic view of life, this is no myth, no imaginary tale told to fools.

To those who view the sentient world from the correct angle, that is with dispassionate discernment, one thing becomes abundantly clear; there is only one problem in the world, that of suffering (*dukkha*). As the Buddha says: The world is established on suffering, is founded on suffering (*dukkhe loko patitthito*). If anything becomes a problem there is bound to be suffering, unsatisfactoriness, or if we like, conflict – conflict between our desires and the facts of life.

To this single problem we give different names: economic, social, political, psychological and even religious problems. Do not they all emanate from that one single problem, *dukkha*, namely, unsatisfactoriness? If there is no unsatisfactoriness, why need we strive to solve them? Does not solving a problem imply reducing the unsatisfactoriness? All problems bring about unsatisfactoriness, and the endeavour is to put an end to them, but they beget each other. The cause is often not external, but in the problem itself, it is subjective. We often think that we have solved problems to the satisfaction of all concerned, but they often crop up in

other forms, in diverse ways. It seems as if we are constantly confronted with fresh ones, and we put forth fresh efforts to solve them, thus they and the solving of them go on incessantly. Such is the nature of suffering, the universal characteristic of sentient existence. Sufferings appear and pass away only to reappear in other forms. They are both physical and psychological, and some people are capable of enduring the one more than the other and vice versa.

Facts of Life

Life according to Buddhism is suffering; suffering dominates all life. It is the fundamental problem of life. The world is suffering and afflicted, no being is free from this bond of misery and this is a universal truth that no sensible man who sees things in their proper perspective can deny. The recognition of this universal fact, however, is not a total denial of pleasure or happiness. The Buddha, the Lord over suffering, never denied happiness in life when he spoke of the universality of suffering. In the *Anguttara Nikaya* there is a long enumeration of the happiness that beings are capable of enjoying.

In answering a question of Mahali Licchavi, the Buddha says:

‘Mahali, if visible forms, sound, smell, taste and tactile objects (these, as you know, are sense objects which man experiences through his sense faculties), are entirely subject to suffering, beset with suffering, and entirely bereft of pleasure and happiness, beings will not

take delight in these sense objects; but, Mahali, because there is pleasure and happiness in these sense objects, beings take delight in them and cling to them; because of this clinging they defile themselves.'

Through sense faculties man is attracted to sense objects, delights in them and derives enjoyment (*assada*). It is a fact that cannot be denied, for you experience it. Neither the delightful objects nor the enjoyments, however, are lasting. They suffer change. Now when a man cannot retain or is deprived of the pleasures that delight him, he often becomes sad and cheerless. He dislikes monotony, for lack of variety makes him unhappy, and looks for fresh delights, like cattle that seek fresh pasture, but these fresh delights, too, are fleeting and a passing show. Thus all pleasures, whether we like it or not, are preludes to pain and disgust. All mundane pleasures are fleeting, like sugar-coated pills of poison they deceive and harm us.

A disagreeable dish, an unpleasant drink, an unlovely demeanour, and a hundred other trifles, bring pain and dissatisfaction to us – Buddhist or non-Buddhist, rich or poor, high or low, literate or illiterate. Shakespeare merely gives voice to the words of the Buddha when he writes in Hamlet: 'When sorrows come they come not single spies, but in battalions.'

Now when man fails to see this aspect of life, this unsteadiness of pleasures, he becomes disappointed and frustrated, may even behave foolishly, without sense or judgement and even lose balance of mind. This is the

danger, the evil consequence (*adinava*). Mankind is frequently confronted with these two pictures of life. Yet the man who endeavours to get rid of his deep fondness for things, animate and inanimate, and views life with a detached outlook, who sees things in their proper perspective, whose cultural training urges him to be calm under all life's vicissitudes, who can smile when things go wrong, and maintain balance of mind putting away all likes and dislikes – he is never worried but liberated. (*nissarana*) These three, *assada*, *adinava* and *nissarana*, or enjoyment, their evil consequences and liberation are facts of experience – a true picture of what we call life.

In answering the question of Mahali the Buddha continues: 'Mahali, if visible forms, sound, smell, taste and tactile objects are entirely subject to pleasure, beset with pleasures and not bereft of pain, beings will not be disgusted with sense objects, but, Mahali, because there is pain and no lasting pleasure in these sense objects, they feel disgusted, being disgusted they do not delight in and cling to them; not clinging, they purify themselves.'

Now there are these three aspects of suffering:

- suffering in its most obvious ordinary form (*dukkha-dukkhata*);
- suffering or the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned states (*sankhara-dukkhata*);
- suffering caused by change (*viparinama dukkhata*).

All mental and bodily sufferings such as birth, ageing, disease, death, association with the unloved,

dissociation from the loved, not getting what one wants are the ordinary sufferings of daily life and are called *dukkha-dukkhata*. Not much science is needed to understand this fact of life.

Sankhara-dukkhata, unsatisfactoriness of conditioned states, is of philosophical significance. Though the word *sankhara* implies all things subject to cause and effect, here in the context of *dukkha* the five groups or aggregates (*pancakkhandha*) are meant. They are the aggregates of matter (in this case the visible, tangible body of form), of sensations, of perceptions, of mental formations and of consciousness. They are known briefly as *nama-rupa*, the psycho-physical entity. *Rupa* includes the physical aggregate and *nama* the remaining four aggregates. The combination of the five constitutes a sentient being.

A being and the empirical world are both constantly changing. They come into being and pass away. All is in a whirl, nothing escapes this inexorable unceasing change, and because of this transitory nature nothing is really pleasant. There is happiness, but very momentary, it vanishes like a flake of snow, and brings about unsatisfactoriness.

Viparinama dukkha comes under the category of unsatisfactoriness due to impermanence. All the pleasant and happy feelings that man can experience fade away and disappear. As the Buddha says, even the feelings that a yogi or meditator experiences by attaining the four meditative absorptions (*jhana*), come under the category

of *viparinama dukkha*, because they are transient (*anicca*), *dukkha*, and subject to change (*viparinamadhamma*). But the *dukkha* mentioned here is certainly not the pain and suffering that people in general endure. What the Buddha points out is that all things impermanent are unsatisfactory.

They suffer change every moment and this change brings about unsatisfactoriness; for whatever is impermanent is unsatisfactory (*yadaniccam tam dukkham*). That is, there is no lasting bliss.

The Buddha, did not have a funereal expression on his face when he explained to his followers the truth of *dukkha*, suffering; far from it, his face was always happy, serene and smiling for it showed his contented mind:

“Happy, indeed, we live,
We who have no burdens.
On joy we ever feed
Like radiant deities.”

He encouraged his disciples not to be morbid, but to cultivate the all important quality of joy (*piti*) which is a factor of enlightenment. A dispassionate study of Buddhism will tell us that it is a message radiating joy and hope and not a defeatist philosophy of pessimism.

